Mindy:

With me and do we have anyone with a burning desire to be a reporter at the end of this?

Mindy:

[inaudible 00:00:14].

Mindy:

Thank you.

Speaker 3:

Thanks, [inaudible 00:00:22].

Mindy:

Thank you. All right. Let me copy and paste these questions, these weighty questions into this app.

Speaker 3:

Do we know how much time we have in the breakout rooms?

Mindy:

I think we have 20 to 25 minutes. We wanted to make sure it wasn't as rushed as last month's. You might notice the groups are a little bit smaller, and we've got time. Don't feel pressured to rush through your thoughts.

Mindy:

Whenever someone's ready to start us off, I would love to get discussion going on this first question. Do you think a racial caste system exists in Brookhaven? Why or why not?

Connie:

I think it's hard not to think it exists across America, whether that's today, last year, 20 years ago, 50 years ago, and especially if you took any of the components, but more specifically housing and education, specific to Brookhaven. You think about Lynnwood Park and the story that you just shared, Mindy. I think about my husband's in commercial say it's real estate, and he sold I think it was 20 acres in Pine Hills. It was a 80-something year old black woman that literally came out with a rifle, and the only person she let on the property was my husband. He's black. Because she had been taken advantage of and tried to be taxed out of the property, and all the property around her had been stolen, for lack of a better term. Yes, I think when you think about housing and education, how can you not consider that?

Jeremiah:

I guess I would just echo what Connie said there. You know, I think property taxes and affordable housing are the typical example of what negative effects happen when it comes from terms of gentrifying a specific area and pushing out the community that was there and not affording them the benefits that come with some of those gains that happen as areas start to uplift or higher income people start to move in. Then I think it's pretty obvious in the school statistics that we saw recently, I think it was last meeting or the meeting before, but even if you go through research just on grade schools and the elementary schools across different zip codes and different district lines.

Jeremiah:

Then you look at some of the redistricting that happened a couple of years ago here in Brookhaven itself and with the affected populations and stuff like that, it definitely feels like, whether intentional or not, that such a system can definitely exist and meaningfully impact a child's future. To the example that, Tom, you were giving, that was really deep and heavy stuff to start us of, but I definitely appreciated that perspective.

Tom:

Go Georgia Tech.

Jeremiah:

Go Jackets.

Tom:

I think for me, I'm trying to think through what the term cast is. I guess whenever I think about Brookhaven, I mean, definitely I connect the Northern portion of Brookhaven's as more fluent. I think it's a question about where people live, at least for me, North Brookhaven's definitely more affluent then the south portion of Brookhaven because if you start driving towards like the modernization, like everything before, it's definitely a very different environment. Once you get to the Brookhaven station and there's developed mushrooms there. It's definitely very clear how much more affluent area when compared to the sidewalks in [inaudible 00:05:15] put it all and the Northeast Plaza.

Jeremiah:

I think everybody's not always going to make the same income or live in the same quality of housing or necessarily go to schools. That would be ideal. So I think we have to delve into possibly the effects of a caste system and to see how that may disadvantage certain people because they're assumed to be less than, or not equal to others. I think that's where we really have to do some hard thinking about this. It's not just about the fact that we're not all living in spacious homes with nice driveways and cars in the driveway.

Jeremiah:

I happened to for different reasons outside of this commission in late December, I was looking at the police arrest reports in Brookhaven for the past three months. I was really, really surprised. A very strong pattern emerged. I would think as I remember something like 75% of the arrests were Hispanic people, surnamed people, and by and large, they were traffic violations driving without a license, not having insurance, running a stop sign or stoplight. It was something like that. The second most frequent reason for an arrest was having to do with marijuana or something fairly minor in terms of drugs, very few breaking and entering, no major crimes like personal assaults, murder, things like that. I just thought, well that's probably an indication of excessive or imbalanced policing perhaps. Anyway, that's maybe a topic we could talk about under the racial caste category.

Connie:

Yeah. That, I mean, certainly sound like a reason to believe that a racial caste system exists in Brookhaven.

Jeremiah:

It was not proportional to the populations.

Ruben:

Now, my experience has been with the Hispanic community, at large. I'm an attorney. I've dealt quite a bit with the Hispanics in Brookhaven, and you can see the differences. It's that obvious between the caste is definitely, it's in play there. There you have immigrants, undocumented immigrants, don't speak the language. They don't know how to manage the system. They feel that they themselves they're inferior class, and not only because of the situation that they're in, but also because the way they're treated. It's very, very, very obvious. The court system do same thing. The court system is broken and [inaudible 00:08:07], for instance, have gotten a lot better, but you know, 30 years ago it was obvious that there was a class system in play when you went to court.

Jeremiah:

I'm one of the weird people in that it, I don't actually live in Brookhaven. I worked in Brookhaven in social work in the south side of Brookhaven just [inaudible 00:08:27] Druid in Buford. I know I come in with very limited experience of what Brookhaven is as well. I think there's two points that stand out to me is when I think of a caste system, I do kind of have that middle picture of this almost tier level bottom up, just as I learned about it in school, thinking about India. It always had this pyramid scheme to it, but then you look at Brookhaven. It is almost the south is the lower end, and you get more economically sound as you go up.

Marco:

I just think it's something that's interesting that we almost have that pyramid like south to north out of economical divide. That's just interesting to me, and then the idea that almost Brookhaven also seems it could be a part of a larger caste system of Atlanta. That's where you go when you go up the caste system is to Brookhaven, and you're now on this next level up. Those are two things when we think about a caste system, even just the geography and the population of Brookhaven as we were given so many statistics about last time. I think those things stand out to me.

Tom:

I think one of the things that they challenge us about defining caste, and you use the example of what we know about Indian society, which is probably most of what I knew too, before I started reading about how it applies to America is whether people have the ability to break out of that structure. Can they take jobs in different fields? Can they advance their income or their social status or where they live or how they interact with power of government, for instance. How do they learn the system? You know, a part of me wonders if some of the more recent immigrants, I think this is a pattern anywhere in the country, they tend to cluster together in neighborhoods where they speak the same language and have the same cultural affinity. Over time, when they feel more comfortable operating within the larger society they found themselves in, do they feel free to not necessarily leave their culture behind, but do they feel able to participate in the larger society and still carry their rich culture with them, maybe? Is that a way to talk about it, Mindy or...

Mindy:

I think so. I think you're speaking to whether there is that welcoming sense and inclusive sense as a part of society, which in a fully inclusive society, I think people feel safe to just be who they are whether that's culturally or personally around their sexuality, gender, disability, everything, yeah.

Speaker 1:

No, I tell [inaudible 00:11:32] that nobody's is going there and you think that... I'm sorry Twanna. I heard your voice. you go first.

Twanna:

Okay. Sorry if I sound a little far away. I'm next to my computer, but sometimes it's not quite. I think the housing thing sticks out to me as well, because even if you didn't live in Brookhaven and you were just to ride around and someone said, "Here's the map of Brookhaven. Come check it out." There are stark differences, you know, in different areas. I mean it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out, and I think the video that accompanied the words that were played in the video I think were really important around the house examples. If you ignore the things that are going on and the creeks of the things that are suspected that could become bigger issues, something's going to happen to the house. You're going to have to do something to it.

Twanna:

I think that that example is just really, really important because it forces us to say to ourselves, let's look at the mirror. Let's pull up the mirror and find opportunities where we can create a better sense of belonging, because I think that's the most important thing is being able to live somewhere where you feel like you belong. You can walk down the street; you feel like you belong no matter where you're at.

Twanna:

I do think, I don't remember who mentioned it, but someone mentioned that it's really the core of the issue starts just really by just the nation that we're in and just the history of our nation. It's a tough one to break because you have to keep fighting it, but I'm really proud that we're at least having an opportunity to contribute to a change. I think this is going to be some really powerful work that we're doing, and I hope that it inspires other cities to do the same thing. The more we work together, the more we can make more effective change. I just figured I'd add onto the piece on the second piece to the question, but the housing piece to me stick out is it's so prominent. It's so prominent.

Shahrukh:

I think that the point you just made is super interesting, and I was kind of thinking about that, Tom, when you were talking about the caste system and the points about the pronouncing that correctly Twanna?

Twanna:

Yep.

Shahrukh:

Okay, around feeling comfortable, right, because I would just amend your statement a little bit, Tom, and say that, can you progress financially, economically or whatever right, in status, but keep yourself as you are and not fundamentally change yourself to fit some different definition of who you should be.

Tom:

Just live?

Shahrukh:

I live in the Brookhaven Fields neighborhood, and my wife, we're Muslim. She wears the hijab right. It's very clear when you see people and we're walking who don't want to talk to us, right, or don't say hello back or stuff like that, right, or you walk into a nicer restaurant and you see four people just kind of look and stare for an uncomfortable period of time and things like that. I don't have to deal with, right? I don't have... I have a beard, but it's not obvious or anything like that, right, but for her, she has to live with that constantly.

Speaker 4:

It's not as obvious as the housing problem, which is a problem that we've been talking about and stuff like that. When you were describing the pyramid and kind of like how you move and when Twanna you were describing it, I was like, man, it's really like creating a system or creating an environment where everyone is comfortable being who they are and truly being who they are, right, not having to dress up themselves in some way to try to fit in.

Mindy:

You know, I love where both of you guys were going in what I was going to say to Tom. You and Twanna kind of touched on it, and that is, I think about... I do leadership consulting and a whole lot of executive coaching for executive level leaders, and I got to tell you when this diversity thing comes up, it's really interesting. Whether it's from a hiring perspective or whether it's from a a development perspective, and what I find is folks are embracing diversity. They say, "That's what we want." That's what and I think about Brookhaven in our city, and yet when it happens, the expectation, which is Shahrukh, is that right?

Speaker 4:

Shahrukh.

Mindy:

Shahrukh, with the expectation is that we'll assimilate. You hire for diversity or you invite diversity, and then you expect everybody to blend in to the dominant culture. I don't even think it's always with malice. I think it happens because that's the standard because the dominant culture created the standard. As a result, we're all judged by that dominant culture standard, and I think that's where we've got to really, really focused and check ourselves in this commission is to say, hey, why is that the norm? When we're sitting here trying to say that we want to create a sense of inclusion and belonging, how come that gets to be the norm?

Ruben:

Well, there are certain things that make us Americans, I suppose, and I think that as an immigrant from another country, you do tend to assimilate to certain things that are American. That's the tricky part. How much of that assimilation... You don't want to lose yourself in that assimilation of being an American. It goes back to what is being an America?

Speaker 3:

The housing are for and the idea of this house that we see the things that we want to improve on. What I think could be a challenge for the idea of this commission is are we all going to look into the same projects? Are we going to notice the same cracks and want to all fix the same things? If one person sees a bathroom and wants a new, nice bathroom, and another person sees a kitchen that isn't sustainable for making a meal, as a commission, are we going to be able to decide on which parts of the house is actually need to be developed to increase the property value of where we live.

Mindy:

I think that's the beauty of having a diverse group. I think we'll point out different things.

Tom:

I hope so.

Mindy:

Connie, what were you going to say?

Connie:

Pretty much what, what you touched on, Mindy, and I think that the issue is if you look left and you look right and you see the same thing that you're used to seeing, and the people that are weighing in is the same, then there's a lot that's missed. There's a whole lot of blind spots. Hopefully what we ought to do is incorporate the various and broaden our lenses just by, let's say, Tom sharing, or Twanna sharing is, oh, that might be something that I missed and being open to the fact that perhaps we did. I really hope that we're able to have healthy debate, which might be heated debate, but still healthy and not personal about what the right thing is to do, let's say, in order to read the caste system or address it.

Mindy:

Yeah. I think when you said heated debate, it made me think about this question of norms, right, and that it's such an accepted norm that what is acceptable is for you to keep an even tone. You address things without emotion, and as soon as things are heated, you're outside of the norm, right. People don't want to listen to you anymore, even if the words coming out of your mouth are entirely valid. I hear what you're saying about the norms and Ruben also, who gets to set the norms and what does it mean? What are American norms? Maybe a part of this process will be defining those norms for this group in a way that everyone feels heard.

Mindy:

I just got a text that I think we're extending the discussion to 8:15 since a lot of the other groups are having healthy conversation. I was wondering if we might use the rest of this time to talk about the second question and try to, I was going to say drill down, but we don't have to have all the answers, but talk about the second question, which we've started to get to. How do we ensure that the recommendations that emerge from the commission acknowledge issues of racial caste? I think we've touched on this a little bit. I guess part of that was me [inaudible 00:20:42]. Most people get heated every now and then, but what else?

Jeremiah:

I think one way is that it's sort of like a sphere that we look at all sides. We turn it over and around and look under it and around it. We don't just let particular voices dominate the conversation or particular examples of caste be the only examples we inspect and make recommendations for.

Twanna:

I would also add it doesn't have an end date. We have precept in this whole space. I think that we have, you know. I know we have a one-year term, but you can't just commit to having this be a focus area, and it ends in a year. I'm glad that we have pushed forward, but I do think that as part of our work, even though we may make great strides and we may have some wins, but we're truly committed to this work. I think we have to also be courageous and embrace the fact that this work doesn't have an end date. There is no project timeline. Yes, it might be committees. There might be projects or what have you. Regardless of what outcomes we deliver, we need that long-term important commitment beyond just this one year.

Speaker 3:

I agree with Twanna. I think whatever recommendations we do create should be... What am I trying to say? I think they can change. Whatever recommendation we make within a year, we should be open to changing them within another, if necessary, six months or within another year. I think whatever recommendations we make should be very malleable.

Mindy:

Allow them to evolve.

Speaker 3:

Yeah.

Tom:

It's somehow or the other, we need to find a way to maybe vet the recommendations against the broader community. You know, just to show up to this meeting, you have to be able to have access to the internet, read English, right, fill out the form and do all those things. If we're really interested in making sure we're not just patting ourselves on the back and moving on, we've got to make sure that we're reaching out to the people who couldn't get here, right, or even applied to be part of this, to make sure the recommendations resonate with them as well.

Speaker 4:

That's excellent.

Jeremiah:

Well, it's often been said, if you're going to make change, you have to involve the people that it would change. You can't have other people impose change on people thinking it's for their better good if you're not one of those people. I know it sounds like Connie and I'm sure others have participated in a lot of facilitation and workshops, and process is very important in terms of how you make sure that the recommendations are good, thorough and accurate, you know, and the process itself gets buy-in of some sort from the affected parties.

Speaker 4:

Looks like the article that we read, the idea of using it with the people and acknowledging one that as a commission, we're also not all the people. We're a voice of different parts of the people, and is there a way where the work that we're doing as the people is also still going, as we are an extension of with the people, are we also going to extend that too, with the people for the broader community, too?

Speaker 3:

Somebody did their homework.

Speaker 4:

Just want to make sure y'all know. [crosstalk 00:24:41].

Speaker 3:

It sounds like maybe should we then be open to ask people to opinions, us individually as commissioners asking people for what what their opinions are, but I think it's kind of hard to like comment, ask what is our ask of people? You know, how much...

Speaker 4:

How do we test them or vet the recommendations before we deliver them?

Jeremiah:

I'm don't know. One of the ways in which we try to ensure our recommendations are valid is that we do continue to move forward in a way where everyone's opinion is valid and acceptable and safe in this space as well. That we continue to know as we end up in these different committees, that everyone does get the chance to have their voice heard, because if there's dominant voices in even our little commission that take over focus, it can be one of the ways in which we make it in our own way. I know we start with that on purpose to really lay a foundation of inclusion and everyone's safe and your voice is valid. We want to hear your opinion. I think part of it is ensuring that we continue and that's always going to be the way that it feels eight months from now, when we all know each other. Maybe it made each other angry or been heated at times, right. Are we still going to feel safe to accept all the opinions that come to the table?

Tom:

I have a little story about that. If you don't mind, we've got about two minutes left. I was lucky enough to be involved with a small group of people at the very onset of thinking about the new Georgia Aquarium when it was being envisioned by Bernie Marcus, and just his small group of people that he'd already hired. He said from very beginning, he said, okay, there are five or eight people in this room. He said, "Everybody's got an equal say, and we don't want to get halfway down in the process and realize we've made a big mistake and it's going to be a flop, and you had a different idea, but you didn't say so."

Tom:

That was very informative for me. You know, here's this guy he's worth billions of dollars. He's sitting across the table from us, and we're just lucky to be involved and feel fortunate to be involved in helping to create this vision for him. It's a powerful, if you're comfortable enough as a leader. He obviously was and had reason to be. You can say those things, but you'd have to really put it into practice, which I think he did.

Shahrukh:

Yeah. I think that's interesting. I mean, there's there's tips and tricks on how you cannot stifle a conversation, but keep it going even if there's a difference of opinion. I mean, one simple trick that comes out of improv, right, when you're doing innovation and discussing ideas is the old, yes, and trick. Not yes but not no but just anytime someone says something, even if you don't agree with it just yes, and, and then tack your thing on the end of it.

Mindy:

I love that.

Shahrukh:

It's actually a thing I have created as a norm in my team at work, right. I'm in product management. Whenever we're innovating, talking ideas, it's always saying yes, and yet saying yes, and people love it, and it works really well. [Crosstalk 00:28:04].

Connie:

[crosstalk 00:28:04] So proud of you as a leader. We would be saying that.

Jeremiah:

I'm a therapist. That's one of my favorite interventions is changing buts into ands. It literally will change how you see your entire world.

Jeremiah:

Maybe some form of commissioned norms, right that gets stated that are like, okay, as a commission, this is how we behave.

Connie:

Yeah.

Jeremiah:

That's the baseline of how everyone should interact as we get more heated in our conversations.

Mindy:

We're about to get kicked out, but it makes me think about those ground rules that we shared last month, which I don't expect you to remember, but I feel like effective ground rules are those that you remind the group of them continuously. They also eat up time. We had to, but you all are bringing up a very good argument for continuing to emphasize that because if we don't, like Jeremiah said those loudest voices might overpower just as valuable, but maybe shyer or hesitant voices.

Jeremiah:

Part of how we do it is we all do it, continue. It's not on you guys to remind us. We remind each other of the safety that exists that we're in.

Connie:

I think you quoted Tom's point with Bernie Marcus is you've got this continuum of... [inaudible 00:29:36]